



February 23, 2022

Connecticut General Assembly
Energy and Technology Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 3900
Hartford, CT 06106

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT with Modification of HB 5116 AN ACT REQUIRING THE CREATION OF UTILITY COMPANY TREE PLANTING FUNDS

Dear Senator Needleman, Representative Arconti and all members of the Energy and Technology Committee,

The Fairfield Forestry Committee, a voluntary group of citizens of the Town of Fairfield established in 2006, is in support of the intent of HB 5116 AN ACT REQUIRING THE CREATION OF UTILITY COMPANY TREE PLANTING FUNDS. We do, however, have some concerns with details and hope there would be some modifications considered.

We do not see a need for the entire program and decision-making process of this program to be left with the utilities. The State Vegetative Management Task Force was a working example of how the Electric Distribution Companies (EDCs) or “utilities,” Tree Wardens and tree advocacy groups, like the Fairfield Forestry Committee came together to help craft a report to move the state forward. We hope this type of collaboration can continue. In PURA’s final decision in docket 18-12-25 a DEEP working group was suggested to address the EDC veg management programs. It would seem formation of this group would be essential and the decision-making body this bill could rely on.

The bill as written gives all power to the utilities but could potentially have the unintended consequence to promote removal by the utilities because of the possibility to replant. We would surely want to preclude that from happening.

Before we talk about replanting, we must remember how long it takes for a tree to grow to a mature height and girth and the value it provides at that age. Once we remove that large shade tree, we won’t ever get that natural resource back. Replanting is done with a much smaller, younger tree that takes many decades to get back to the level of productivity of the tree that was removed. Before we think about replanting, we must consider how can judiciously manage our existing roadside trees so they are and remain healthy and safe for as long as possible – this is MUCH cheaper than the vegetative management process we are currently employing. We have not been employing this mindset in the past so we will have to play catchup to get here but we must start immediately.

Although, not the purview of this bill, we would be remiss not to recommend that we should start to put our utility lines underground now on our main arteries. By not doing this we are throwing money away every 4 years as we go back to trim / remove trees on these circuits. This resolves our power as well as our tree issues and has been proven to effective in so many communities surrounding Connecticut.

The placement of the tree to be planted should be determined at the municipal level, not solely at the discretion of the utility, as is currently in the bill. Best management practice for tree planting, including as prescribed by the utilities, is a “right tree, right place” focus and we would not want to preclude the ability to plant in any location. The type of tree, diversity of tree, the value of tree to the local ecosystem, how it will deal with climate change, the harshness of the roadside environment, etc. all these considerations are factored into the Fairfield Forestry Committee’s Community Forest Management Plan and our annual Tree Planting Program tree list. There may be other towns that have an urban forestry plan in place that at the local level that may have equitable distribution of canopy, forestry management considerations that have been well defined by experts and / or many other considerations that should not be swept aside solely to utility considerations.

Along with tree planting comes the operational and maintenance costs to maintain these newly planted trees. The local municipal budget related to watering, pruning and protection from wildlife, deer and / or issues cannot be forgotten.

To be sure, we do think this bill is a step in the right direction and appreciate the Committee for bringing this bill forward.

Sincerely,

Mary Hogue
Chair, Fairfield Forestry Committee
725 Old Post Road
Fairfield, CT 06824